

The Tramp's Glass

“The tramp’s glass” was one of mother’s innovations. It was a glass tumbler with a solid base and thick, straight, fluted sides. It might have been the last survivor of a set. The glass was clouded, opaque, so that to me it looked as if it hadn’t been properly washed, although I knew it was kept scrupulously clean. It was kept separate from the other glasses, and we children never used it. Occasionally mother would open the door from the shop into the family living room and ask for someone to go to the kitchen to fill the glass, although she would be more likely to do this herself, because she had a fine sense of who could be left unattended in the shop and who could not. She trusted her tramps. Local kids, on the whole, she did not.

The tramp’s glass was in regular use. And mother’s tramps only ever asked for a glass of water, they never tried to beg anything more. They addressed her as “lady”. I had read about tramps, real tramps, and knew of the arcane language of signs which they would scratch onto walls and gateposts to share their knowledge of the road – signs which would warn of a hostile reception, for example, or indicate where they would be freely given food or water. The I-Spy Book of the Countryside included a few of these signs, with substantial points awarded for spotting them, because of their rarity. I used to wonder if some such sign pointed to our shop, but I never saw evidence of one.

Mother always carried with her that sense that she came from another world. She had grown up in a town but it was a town still open to and connected with the countryside around, where she could walk and play as a child, countryside where there were friends and family. A softer world which she always felt was different to the North, the hard and hard-edged north, which she hated, implacably. Her tramps were the tramps of her childhood, tramps out of Edward Thomas, Flora Thompson, George Borrow, Hardy, and her beloved Richard Jefferies, from her own Wiltshire.

And watching her stand behind the shop counter, chatting, quite easily, while a weathered dusty figure in an old army greatcoat took his time drinking from the tramp’s glass, I understood that our house was linked by a mysterious secret system of coded signs into a network which stretched away miles and miles down the main road in each direction, out beyond the black sprawl of Manchester and Salford and into the countryside around, invisible filaments which reached on and on through the rest of the country, the whole of the country, never-ending invisible paths, and that my mother’s heart yearned to be elsewhere.

Twenty Questions

Mummy, why is that old woman talking to herself?
Shhh... Because she is less fortunate than we are, dear.
Mummy, why does that man smell of wee?
Why is that woman walking on crutches?
Why has that man only got one eye?
Why are those people sleeping on the pavement?

Mummy, why is that woman asking us for money?
Why aren't those people speaking English?
Why do those women have scarves across their faces?
Mummy, why do those boys have funny little caps on their heads?
Why is that woman being shouted at?
Why was that man thrown off the bus?
Shhh... Because he is less fortunate than we are, dear.

Mummy, why does the little girl next door not come to play any more?
Why did my teacher suddenly leave?
Why are those young girls wearing lipstick and make-up?
Shhh...
Why are all those people running?
Because -
Mummy, why have the children next door stopped going to school?
Shhh... Because they are less fortunate than we are, dear.

Why are those people kneeling?
Why have our neighbours gone away?
Why are those women crying?
Shhh... Because they are less fortunate than we are, dear.

Birdie

Tap-tapping on the window. It is the great-tit, hurling himself at the glass, hovering, attacking again, disappearing for a minute or two and then swerving back into view to make another kamikaze assault.

“Birdie,” I say, “Some mornings you wake me up. You have been doing this for the last fortnight. Have you learned nothing yet?”

Tap-tap-tap. Flutter. *What do I need to learn? There is a rival hovering in front of me, I am seeing him off, and when I attack he attacks, when I retreat he retreats.*

“It’s only me in here,” I say. “There is no bird, just me and my books.”

In here? He cheeps, fluttering, indignant. *There is no ‘in here’. There is only the space I fly through.*

“But you are just plain wrong, birdie,” I say. “There is glass between us. You are attacking your own reflection in the window.”

He puffs out his bright yellow breast. *Wrong? You are standing twenty feet above the ground, taking up space in space. In a hundred years time this house will be gone, no-one will be standing here in mid-air, magically levitating, but this space will still be here, and birdies will be flying through it.*

A chubby, cheerful little soul, this bird, and not to be gainsaid.

Your books will be blown dust. There will be no bookshelves suspended in nothingness twenty feet above the ground. All your structures are temporary, a brief shuffle of matter through the empty air

“But there will be traces,” I say, “People walking from room to invisible room in the sky; traces left behind like a time-lapse photo that only God can see.”

He is busily hammering at the glass again. He is a bird that wants the last word. *Foolish mortal! There will only be the zigzags and pirouettes of tits and finches.* And the wind blowing.

Get out of bed, rush for the loo. Back for my dressing gown, then to the kitchen, shivering, the lino cold and clammy on my bare feet, while I wait for the kettle to boil, and while I try to shake off the anxiety that clings to me after my dream.

I am on a cruise ship in the Eastern Mediterranean, a cultural cruise, Greece is already behind us, and then the Palace of Knossos on Crete, and we have sailed from Heraklion. Chill air conditioning, but you step outside into a wall of heat. Few of the punters are out on deck in the fierce glare of the sun. No, they are in the lecture hall, checking their watches, some of them with notebooks at the ready, they are waiting for me. For we are sailing to Alexandria, and I am about to give a two hour talk on the history and culture of the place, prime the punters before they step ashore. Of course, I will talk about the Great Library, its destruction, the immense modern Bibliotheca Alexandrina, and the catacombs of Kom el-Shuqqafa, and and what else? My mind is as blank as the sky. I have nothing prepared. Desperately, I ask my colleagues, other supposed specialists, I beg each of them, give me one more thing to talk about, but they can't help me, they only know the spiels they have memorised to land these lucrative jobs, and I begin to panic. I tell myself I will never again approach an audience or a class unprepared, I should have learned my lesson by now, please, please, if I get through this I will never again fail like this, I promise. And the seconds are ticking away, I am about to start. And in blind panic I wake up.

Still shivering, with cold and with anxiety, I make the coffee and return to the cocoon of duvet and blankets. Outside, the thin layer of snow looks like icing on the shed roofs and the parked cars.

The dream still clings. Now we are approaching Alexandria, I can see the sweep of the Corniche and the fading glory of some of the buildings and the huge sun disk of the Biblioteca. Boys are already gathering on the dockside, waiting to pester, to tug at your clothes, to beg you to buy.

I sit in bed with the coffee mug warm in my hand, my breath clouding the air. I have woken up before the central heating comes on.

Alexandria! Oh, Alexandria!

Sun 15th Mar 2020

I returned from my trip to Bratislava and Budapest late last Monday.

A strange week since then. The coronavirus is beginning to loom larger in people's thoughts. Two weeks ago I didn't feel concerned, although when I was away I followed the news closely because there might be travel restrictions – and at the back of my mind was the thought that I didn't want to get the virus while I was abroad. But now Europe is experiencing different degrees of lockdown, widespread travel restrictions, and the US has banned incoming movement from Europe. It seems that within a few weeks this country will move into a stricter preventative regime – schools closing, over 70s ordered to stay at home.

It has been slightly chastening for me, to identify myself as old, when I spend so much energy denying this. But there it is, whether I like it or not I am on the wrong side of the line.

Sun 18th Mar 2020

Things have moved very quickly in the last few days. I went into Manchester on Monday and Cat and I discussed the *More in Common* project assuming that it would still go ahead. My main concern was that I might have to isolate myself and therefore withdraw while the project went on without me. By the end of the afternoon, after another government press conference, the mood had changed. Over 70's, people with underlying health conditions, pregnant women, were advised to stay at home.

I felt unwell anyway, with a bad cold and a persistent cough. It is not a good thing to cough in public in the present climate.

Before coming home I met H and we went to *The Bull's Head* for a couple of hours. I was aware that this would be my last drink in a pub for some time. Of course, life goes on. Manchester was quieter than usual, but not deserted. Most people were still going to work.

Today – and it is only two days later – there has been a further escalation. Schools will close at the end of this week. There will be provision for children of essential workers, and vulnerable children, to attend, but the majority of children and teenagers will not. It seems that we are moving rapidly towards doing what other countries have already done, which is no longer to advise but to order people to stop non-essential travel, stop socialising and so on – and to enforce these orders – although it is difficult to envisage the police or the army on the streets of Britain interrogating people as to why they are out of their houses.

I am isolating myself, which is not so difficult here because I can go for a walk easily enough. It is not like being stuck in a high-rise flat in an inner city.

I have assumed that isolation will not be difficult for me, although perhaps I am too blasé about this. It is hard to judge at the moment, because I still feel unwell because of my cold, and this has subdued me.

And of course, there is (my son) F. He is on his way back to Canada, where he has a job to go to in Quebec, as Head Rigger in an outdoor circus (although it's possible that this kind of thing will be cancelled anyway.) Canada has now closed its borders to non-residents. I am not sure where he stands. If he is stuck in the UK for months he will be incredibly frustrated.

Fri 20th Mar 2020

It is only Friday, but last Monday seems a long time ago. It doesn't feel as if my meetings with H and Cat in Manchester were only four days ago.

Sun 22nd Mar 2020

Bright sunshine, clear blue sky, but bracingly cold when I step outside. Yesterday I made myself do my standard walk through Great Wood and back down the hill to Botham's Hall and the river.

While I was walking J (my son) phoned. It still surprises me, to hear music suddenly coming from my pocket; it takes me a moment or two to realise that it's my mobile. J had finally contacted his GP, who was very clear: he should not be going into work, because his asthma puts him at risk. He is relieved, because he was particularly worried about the journey into his school on a crowded bus. He will now work online, from home.

The other news was about F who, with his usual resourcefulness and ingenuity (and impatience) had managed to book on one of the few remaining flights repatriating Canadians from Europe. He must have felt that he had enough evidence of his status to be allowed into the country, although he wasn't sure of this. He had at least got onto a flight, or so it seemed, because he had left at five that morning and J had heard nothing since.

Annie is setting up a Zoom meeting this evening with half a dozen village friends – her invite says "Bring a bottle." I am not sure if this will work or not, but I will have a shave in preparation. Unusually, I haven't shaved for days.

Mon 23rd Mar 2020

I made myself go out for my usual walk. The sun felt warm – I ended up carrying my coat. And a feeling of spring – buds just appearing on some of the trees, just beginning to sprout on the hawthorn bushes. Cowslips, and other little yellow flowers (?) by the stream. In gardens, daffodils and forsythia, and gorse blooming on the hillside. A bee, the first I have seen, nosing in and out of the verge.

F Skype from Quebec. Saturday had been stressful. It was difficult to get on the plane at Manchester Airport – first Security, then Immigration. And even more difficult at Charles de Gaulle. The French Security were at first adamant that he could not travel, and only after he had talked to Immigration and the airline and they had made numerous phone calls was he allowed on the plane. He was the last passenger to embark; he almost missed it. He didn't know if he would be turned away at Montreal...

He and his Canadian partner have to stay indoors for fourteen days. This is a small inconvenience. He has ordered equipment and software so that he can put his bike on a stand and ride the simulated stages of the Tour de France.

I don't want to get this virus – it is a disease of the respiratory system. When I remember struggling to breathe after my heart operation because I had a collapsed lung – and the first night I came home and had to manage without oxygen, and sat up all night gasping for breath – when I remember this, I am resolved to be very careful indeed.

Tues 24th Mar 2020

The first really warm day. More bees today, and butterflies – I think the first I have seen this year. Comma, red admiral. The yellow flowers on the side of the path are celandine, I think.

Yesterday evening Boris Johnson made a statement to the country – watched apparently by 27 million people – laying down stricter measures to restrict the spread of the virus. There is still a certain amount of confusion, however, and where there is not absolute clarity people continue to take liberties.

I have felt much brighter today. My laziness and general torpor over the last few days seems to have been the result of my illness, and not because of isolation.

I continue to buy books over the internet. Two arrived today; the post still seems to be working normally. Before lockdown I bought 15 back issues of *Granta* in the Oxfam in Manchester; they were in the sale, £1 each. I have unlimited reading matter. Somewhere I have a list of books I have bought in the last two or three years and not yet read; it has forty or fifty titles on it.

Weds 25th Mar 2020

Warm again today, and for the first time I sat outside in the sun with a book. Feeling lazy, I allowed this to replace my walk.

Becky, who is a photographer, stopped to chat. We are all getting used to standing or sitting a few metres apart, to carry on a conversation. An aeroplane overhead, low enough to be heard. I can't remember when I last heard, or saw, a plane, although there are very few still flying, either repatriation flights or cargo flights. Becky pointed out how different the sky was with no vapour trails at all – it is just a clear unbroken blue.

Memory of an incident fifty years ago, a generous surfeit. Visiting my then girlfriend's aunt one weekend, we arrived on the Friday evening and were asked what kind of restaurant we would like to go to. I can't remember what we answered, perhaps Turkish. "Good," the aunt said, "because I have already booked a table at the Turkish restaurant." "But how did you know we would choose that?" "I didn't," she said. "I also booked a table at Greek, Italian, Chinese, Indian, French ... restaurants."

Thurs 26th Mar 2020

Feeling of calmness; sitting for fifteen minutes on the supposedly unsafe footbridge over the river, dangling my legs over the side; the lovely varying sound of water running swiftly in shallows. I am settling into solitude, I thought.

Sat 28th Mar 2020

Cold, bright, with a fresh wind – which makes me look out of the window to make sure that the precariously leaning tree is still precariously leaning.

Jaz came over yesterday evening. She had done an extensive shop for me, so that I can stock up on basics. She is very cautious; insisted that I put all the plasticwrapped and tinned goods into a large bin bag and leave them there for 72 hours, told me to wash the fresh stuff, bottles of milk etc. She made me wear gloves when I was helping bring the bags down through the woods from the car parked above. It was dark by then, and cold. We sat and talked for an hour, me on the top step, she below me on the other side of the path. She had come well prepared, warm clothes, a flask of tea for herself. “I should hate to be the one to give you the virus by helping you out with your shopping.”

It was a day of unusual social contact. An hour and a half on the phone with S, and then Jaz here in person – although at a distance – for a couple of hours. I did feel better for it, although slightly unsettled. You settle into solitude; and you get used to being with others. It is the transition from one to the other that is difficult.

I note that one of the unfortunate consequences of the present situation is that domestic abuse is on the rise. Already?

Tues 7th Apr 2020

Yesterday a morning of phone calls, checking up on some of the asylum seekers and refugees that I know, just to check on them, keep in contact. I also received a phone call from my GP's surgery, just checking that I was ok, that I didn't need support. I was impressed by this.

And then the now regular Skype session with my Syrian friends to practice English.

The PM was taken into hospital on Sunday afternoon, into intensive care yesterday. The move to intensive care seems to be precautionary.

I was awake for much of the night again. Not fretful, simply wide awake. When I went into the kitchen to make tea I was surprised at how light it was outside at the back. I thought people had left their lights on and these were shining out and casting shadows. But when I opened the door I saw a huge moon, up to my left, casting long shadows across the ground. Today I read that it is in fact an unusually bright moon, and there will be an exceptionally bright full moon tomorrow.

Thurs 16th Apr 2020

Last Wednesday, as predicted, there was an enormous moon, a very slight but definite pink tinge. A cloudless sky.

I cannot remember the last time I saw or heard an aeroplane.

I have spoken to the boys in the last few days. Sm, in London, has had the virus, and has recovered from it. He said that he was wiped out for a few days, didn't have the strength to stand up, and it has left him tired, but ok. F has managed his self-isolation in Quebec, with the help of his bike on a stand and the Tour de France software. J is no longer going into school, is isolating, and seems fine.

Because I am spending more time outdoors I see more people. On their daily walks they come down through the woods, and then stop and chat for ten or twenty minutes, at a respectful distance.

Sat 18th Apr 2020

I follow the news every day but in much less detail, not nearly as much as three or four weeks ago. This is deliberate: I do not want to be too preoccupied with coronavirus. It remains like distant rumours of war; no casualties have yet reached me.

Even when I am in no mood to contact others, I carry my mobile around with me, religiously, lest someone should contact me.

Mon 4th May 2020

I feel slightly stressed because of that strip of woodland, and the neighbours.

On Saturday I received my delivery of alcohol. This included a disturbingly cheap bottle of whisky. Unfortunately, I started on the whisky on Saturday evening and sat up drinking and listening to music (on headphones) until after the dawn. I slept on and off until three on Sunday, felt queasy, and disappointed in myself. Because I have been managing this lockdown cheerfully and reasonably well, I have been happy with myself lately, but this lapse did make me feel shabby.

One of my sisters says she went shopping in the hour reserved for over-70's in her supermarket, and no-one challenged her. She has mixed feelings about this: she is sixty-six.

Mon 11th May 2020

Stayed too late and had too much too drink in the Zoom Pub last night. It may be a virtual meeting but the hangover is real, and I spent most of the day in bed.

A and M were both very lively during our Skype English session. They are fasting – and it is a long daily fast, when Ramadan falls at this time of year – and they seem to be glowing with good health and bonhomie. (I don't tell them that I have a hangover.)

They have bought some clothes and ear-rings for their youngest daughter today. She will receive them at Eid. We go through the vocabulary, different items of jewellery, “necklace”, “ear-ring”, “bracelet”. I ask A about her jewellery. M says he gave her “much” expensive jewellery when they were married. But A says she only has her wedding ring now. She shows me: her chubby hand on my laptop screen. We don't usually wear our wedding ring on our middle finger, I tell her. She slips it off and onto her second finger, where it is too loose. She has lost weight during Ramadan, she tells me.

She doesn't have any other jewellery because she sold it all, when he was in Lebanon, to raise money “to buy freedom for M”. She sold everything, including her car, and she borrowed money. “M is more important than jewellery,” I say, and they laugh, and beam at each other. But her father, she says, serious again, was a rich man, and he gave a lot of money to free two of his sons from prison. They took his money, but his sons were not released. They were dead.

We learn the words “corrupt” and “corruption.”

I tell them the story about the Chilean man I knew many years ago in Germany. He had been working in Allende's government and was imprisoned by Pinochet's soldiers during the coup. His wife was Russian; she was allowed to return to the Soviet Union. He was reported to have died in captivity, and she believed herself widowed. However, he was still alive and nine months later he was released (as part of a UN or International Red Cross initiative, I'm not sure) and flown to Germany. As soon as he got there he phoned Moscow. His mother-in-law answered the phone, and almost fainted. You are dead, she said. We believed you were dead.

A listens with interest. And then says, I pray one day I get the same phone call, from my brothers. (Two of her brothers were killed in Assad's prisons; one is still unaccounted for). And I feel bad; I had meant this story to be positive, but now I fear that I may have given her a completely unrealistic glimmer of hope.

Sun 17th May 2020

Boris Johnson made a televised speech last Sunday evening, giving a muddled message. People who could not work from home should return to work on Monday. He was effectively giving twelve hours' notice – and also advising people not to use public transport (but how are they to get to work?) and not clarifying the conditions in the workplace which would ensure safety. By Monday the message seemed to be: return to work on Wednesday, and the government started to publish the guidelines for safe working. It is already clear that contrary to the rhetoric – “the virus does not discriminate,” “we are all in this together” – certain groups are more likely to catch and die from COVID – carers, NHS workers, those in physical jobs which involve contact with people, bus drivers, and ethnic minority groups. The partial return to work will confirm or exaggerate these differences.

I sorted out some old bedding, and was going to throw away a slightly worn duvet cover, but I took the scissors to it and tried to make face coverings.

Mon 18th May 2020

Iceland delivery arrived, although the driver had to phone me to find out how to get here. I had ordered some less-than-healthy luxuries, which I have been doing without. So as well as my meal yesterday I ate three packets of crisps, cake, and chocolate. It was Zoom Pub night, and I also drank almost a full bottle of wine. I woke at 5.30 this morning feeling sick – as no doubt I deserved – but fortunately went back to sleep again without throwing up.

Sat 30th May 2020

Re-reading Yeats' *The Tower*, that magnificent poem of rage against old age, I was turning over dates in my mind when I realised that Yeats was only sixty-two or three when he wrote this poem. I write "only", for sixty-two or three does not seem "decrepit" to me. I was surprised that he was still so young – the rage should surely belong to later years.

Another solitary week. There has been, of course, the opportunity to reflect, to think about one's life, but in truth I already had that. I have perhaps done more of this, in the last two months, but this has been a difference of degree not of kind; the writing that I was already doing, in fits and starts, was (is) an exercise in reflection and memory. Last year, my birthday and the feeling that I was beginning to fall to pieces physically had nudged me towards thinking about my own mortality.

I might have expected this pandemic to have concentrated that sense of mortality, but it doesn't seem to have done so. I can shuffle my thoughts around like a pack of cards: turn one up, and it isn't necessarily consistent with the next. So I firmly believe that I won't catch coronavirus; if I do catch it won't kill me (ok, I may have had heart trouble, but it has been fixed); I think I have probably had the virus anyway, that flu-like illness in mid-March; and also – but this card doesn't come up very often – perhaps I will die soon, not necessarily of coronavirus, and I had better prepare for it.

That is the dark thought – not death, but unfinished life.

Which – particularly if I am awake in the middle of the night – makes my stomach shift slightly, makes me think of things undone, compels an urgency into the days to come.

Weds 3rd June 2020

I have decided to get the train into Glossop today, to pick up my prescription and hopefully – if the queue is not too long – to do a catch-up shop at Aldi. I am beginning to feel that if I don't venture out soon it will become increasingly difficult to do so. As it is, I feel slightly nervous, especially about travelling by train. I have the irrational fear that I will be challenged: Is your journey really necessary?

It is so long since I used my debit card that I am not confident that I remember the number.

I managed the excursion; without difficulty, needless to say. The trains were almost empty; only one other person in the carriage on both journeys. The one mishap was that I couldn't remember the PIN number on my debit card; I had to use my credit card instead. The rucksack and two bags were very heavy, about the limit I could manage. Among the luxuries: flowers.

Weds 10th June 2020

Still not at my best. I have sudden seizures of panic – as if I am taking an exam in a few days' time and realise that I have not prepared myself, perhaps it is already too late to salvage the situation, and I accuse my guilty self for all the time I have wasted. Anxiety can be productive, but this is not.

Sometimes, at the end of an evening, I feel empty, bereft. But it passes. I take myself to bed slowly, with a heavy heart. I try to read until I am asleep. But most of the time I am cheerful, almost without knowing it. I catch myself off guard – I am singing, or whistling, unaware of myself.

The last ten days have seen the news dominated by protests in the States after yet another black man was killed by the police (and it was filmed, on someone's phone, and the whole world knew about it). Some days the news coverage was reminiscent of the late sixties, American cities burning. And here in the UK there have been sizeable demonstrations, coronavirus or not. In Bristol a statue of Colston, a slave trader who was also a public benefactor, was torn down and thrown into the docks. What was it doing still standing? Are there statues of Goebbels in Hamburg?

On the front pages of some of the newspapers on Monday morning, Priti Patel (the Home Secretary) promises "Justice!" (Huge one-word headline.) I am amazed: finally, she is responding to all these demonstrations by promising to do more about discrimination and racism? But no – she means that the people who pulled down the slave trader's statue will be found and charged. In Parliament she is quick to leap onto her high horse: "Do not lecture **me** about racism!".

The lockdown is easing here, but again the government is out of step. The plans to have all primary school children back at school for a month before the summer holidays begin have now been scrapped. They were always unrealistic.

Weds 17th June 2020

I seem to have gradually slowed down – as if I have adjusted my pace to the long run, begun to live in slow motion. Is this what long-term prisoners do?

Fri 22nd Jan 2021

Late on Wednesday evening it snowed heavily – large snowflakes, falling slowly. I went out and walked for an hour at 11 pm. The snow wet, but thick on the branches. The river as violent as I have ever seen it.

By the following afternoon most of the snow had gone. But it is so wet underfoot that I am deterred from walking. That, and my inertia. We are of course supposed to be staying at home because of the lockdown, but there are days on end when I don't leave the flat, and this is unhealthy.

Sun 24th Jan 2021

The news, of course, is dominated by COVID. I have learned not to spend too much of my time on this, or it begins to put a dampener on everything. It has become easier to do this because after ten months the subject has become boring. But it does look as if the restrictions on “normal” life will continue into the summer, despite the mass vaccinations. I try not to dwell on this, but to look forward to the spring.

This third lockdown is proving to be the most difficult. Newspapers, television etc have been full of advice on how to cope with isolation, loneliness, boredom and so on. But the worst problems are not these, they are the pressures on parents having to homeschool, on people who have lost their incomes. But there is also this category of isolated old people. I said to one of my sons on the phone the other day, “I feel sorry for all those old people living on their own.” He laughed. “But that is you!” he said. Oh no, I said, indignant, I’m not lonely, I’m not one of that group!

Lockdown deprives us of the usual diversions of life but in response we are flooded with other diversions – the glut of extra films being shown and streamed, the live arts performances, all those tv programmes dedicated to keeping people active and busy, as if the whole country is a Butlins Holiday camp where everyone happens to be confined to their cabins. Pascal: “I have often said that the sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room alone.”

And, a sobering thought, this lockdown may be a trial run for the isolation of old age, when it finally comes. (And the lockdown of old age is final, there is no prospect of an easing of restrictions.)

Weds 27th Jan 2021

A- is at her most businesslike. We are practising the present perfect tense. I ask questions beginning "Have you ever ...?"

"Have you ever climbed a mountain?" She has, but not, it transpires, as a recreational activity. They walked over the mountains to flee from Syria to Turkey.

"Have you ever been to Isfahan?" No, but Isfahan is famous for its carpets, and she once had a beautiful and expensive carpet from Isfahan. "Now it is in some soldier Assad regime house," she says. When they fled Syria their house was stripped by soldiers of the regime.

We talk about lockdown. She does not find the restrictions particularly difficult. She talks about people in Syria who were under siege for months or years. And she herself was in prison for six months, two months in solitary confinement. "So this lockdown is not so bad," she says.

Weds 3rd Feb 2021

A reminder, yesterday evening, of how much of my daily life depends on the internet, especially now, during lockdown. My internet stopped working.

Thurs 4th Feb 2021

I read the news online, I listen to music online, I watch football streamed online, my television reception depends on the internet because I have no functioning aerial; I give ESOL lessons online, I “meet” people online through Skype and I participate in meetings and group gatherings through Zoom. All of this cut off.

I went ahead with a Skype lesson with M and A, on my mobile. This made me realise how difficult it is to negotiate a lesson or a meeting on a mobile. I excused myself from leading a Zoom social group – I couldn’t cope with that on my phone.

Sun 7th Feb 2021

The UK has the highest death rate (relative to population) of all the “advanced” countries. And still people don’t seem to be holding the government to account. The Tory press goes on congratulating the Tory government.

The path through Great Wood has become a morass, getting wider and wider as people try to negotiate the mud. This is partly because more people are out walking, as part of their lockdown exercise. A thin covering of snow up on the moors, none down here, but we are promised a few days of bad weather.

Mon 8th Feb 2021

Isolated as I am, I slop around in the same old clothes, unshaven, unkempt. But before Skype and Zoom meetings vanity kicks in. I shave, put on a fresh shirt, have a bath (because this is the only way to wash my hair, and my hair is too long and aggressively untidy), clean my teeth again.

Fri 19th Feb 2021

Today I ask B, in our English session, to give some examples of the word “allow”.

“My family do not allow me to travel alone,” she says. She is quick to add that this is not a problem; she doesn’t want to travel alone.

D sends me photos of Damascus, seen from high up over the city, from the hillside where she lived. I talk of perhaps going there one day; she will be my guide, she says.

A describes her parents’ home, the family home – rooms around a courtyard, fruit trees, a fountain, swings for the children. It is now razed to the ground. “It is nothing, flat, only ground.” She and her husband lived in a flat nearby. Now the flat is empty, everything has been taken by the soldiers. Not only the valuables, like the Persian carpet she told me about previously, but everything: “even the doors and the windows.”

Sat 27th Feb 2021

Another fine day. I realised that I had hardly been out of the house for days so I did my usual walk, but clockwise round the circuit rather than anti-clockwise, so it seemed a different walk altogether. Clear sky, the blue not dark but intense, the bare trees sharply delineated. The blue made me think of Monet at Argenteuil, I wasn't sure which painting. (I have just looked it up – it is the blue sky in “The Artist's House at Argenteuil.”) Catkins in profusions on some trees. The usual snowdrops, crocuses and other small winter flowers in gardens, but also a few daffodils just beginning to appear. In the garden at the other end of these cottages there are cowslips, which always remind me of mother.

I then wasted much of the rest of the afternoon watching sport on tv.

Mon 1st March 2021

Another bright morning, although there was frost overnight, the car roofs white, the fields speckled with white. The great tit is throwing itself at my window with renewed vigour – it is easy to imagine that it is trying to get in.

I peg out some washing, careful not to lose my footing on the short but steep and slippery rise to the line. The steps I built nearly twenty years ago are beginning to dislodge themselves. The air cold, fresh; a little warmth when you step in the sun. At least for those first few minutes when you step outside, it feels – the old cliché – good to be alive.

But I am tired, having once again woken up ridiculously early on the back of four hours sleep, and I am about to begin four hours of Skype ESOL, so I wish I was not so tired.

Shared history – the shortcuts, the implicit understandings. My sister S, talking to me on the phone last week, reporting on her convalescence from a hip-replacement operation, tells me that when she stands up she no longer makes “mother noises”, and I know exactly what she means.

Weds 1st Apr 2020

I stepped outside for a few minutes about eleven o'clock last night. It was absolutely quiet, except for the low sound of the river. No movement, no distant sounds of traffic, no lights in the sky. (The sky – you realise how much you take it for granted that there are always lights in the sky, always several aeroplanes, in the evening.) The stillness was strange. I thought of the German word, *unheimlich*.

Sun 5th Apr 2020

Deaths are creeping up – over 700 yesterday, over 600 today. And there are more and more questions about the way the government has acted, about their apparent complacency in January and February, the results of which we are seeing now.

For the first time in years, I worked at cutting back the little wilderness opposite my door. This was more tiring than I anticipated, but good for my morale. And unusual enough for Claire next door to express her astonishment.

Two hours of raucous laughter yesterday – even though I was on my own – watching a streaming of the National Theatre's One Man, Two Guvnors.

And I am still visited by intense erotic fantasies about X, even though she has partially withdrawn from my life.

Tues 21st Apr 2020

Some of the trees almost in full leaf now - the hawthorn, for example – others still in bud. Lots of spring flowers, forget-me-nots, primulas, bluebells. A pair of lapwings in a field. And for ten days a continuous rap-rap, tap-tapping on my window, a great tit hovering and attacking, presumably confronting its own reflection. At first this was disconcerting, it did sound as if someone was out there, urgently knocking on the window, desperate for admittance. (I thought of the narrator's first night at Wuthering Heights.)

Some days I have no contact with anyone, others are a (stationary) round of sociability. (Video calls, Skype, Zoom.)

X phoned me. She was walking in the park, taking her permitted exercise – at times I could hear children playing in the background. We talked for an hour. Often when she phones me it is because she wants to unburden herself of some grief or irritation, she wants a sympathetic listening ear. This time it is her mother – who has volunteered to return to work as a nurse, because of the pandemic, and is working long hours, under difficult conditions, with PPE which she has had to obtain herself. The situation in Iran is much worse than the government publicly acknowledges, the death toll much higher. X is worried about her mother; she is also cross, because her mother no longer has time to phone her, she is either working or sleeping.

Weds 22nd Apr 2020

I hadn't noticed it until S pointed it out, but the sky is bluer – a clearer, brighter, cleaner blue.

Fri 24th Apr 2020

It is difficult to judge how much this lockdown is affecting me. I was no longer working, so I have not had to face losing my job, or being put on furlough, or having to continue to go to work with all the nervousness about risks. I was already used to spending time alone. I went out often but it was to meet friends – pubs, coffee bars, restaurants – or go to the cinema, give English classes and take part in other voluntary activities. I can manage – easily enough, so far – without these. There is shopping, of course; these limitations have shown how I take for granted the ease of food shopping. The difficulty now is not only socially distanced shopping, but travelling on public transport. The trains are still running here, an hourly rather than a half hourly service, but I am wary of using them.

I don't like asking people to do things for me, although they are quick to offer and obviously glad to help.

Zoom meeting of City of Sanctuary volunteers yesterday. The youngsters, who are still working or studying full time, seem so competent, so organised, so cheerful. They have organised a referral system for food banks, for asylum seekers who are struggling – so efficient, a spreadsheet, deadlines for referrals, and so on. I am often pessimistic about the future – rightly so, given the evidence – but many of the young people I meet cut through this gloom, bring a welcome light.

Even here, where it is always quiet, it seems quieter. The birds are noisier. Sounds carry a long distance. The river, which is low after a dry fortnight, can still be heard.

And the sky, the sky is so definitely bluer.

The faint honking of geese, a long way away.

I don't know when I will next be able to go to a pub, a cafe, the cinema, or take an English class. It is beginning to look like months rather than weeks.

Tues 28th Apr 2020

I am trying to stop the residents here from using the strip of woodland that belongs to the flat as a place to dump their garden rubbish. These little things can loom large if you are at home all the time.

The Zoom meeting on Sunday evening, the “Zoom Pub”, ended in a late night drinking session, until well after two in the morning.

Hospital deaths continue to fall but deaths in care homes seem to be still increasing. Care homes were given a much lower priority than hospitals; the underlying assumption, although no-one will publicly state it, is that the old can be left to die.

There is also the sickening spectacle of people clapping the NHS, when there are still shortages of PPE, and when many of those clapping have voted over the past ten years to squeeze the funding to the NHS and thus contribute to the difficulties (and unnecessary deaths) that these “angels” are now facing.

I was beginning to fret about food. Finally, I have registered with Morrisons and ordered one of the food boxes that they prepare, and deliver quickly, for the elderly and vulnerable. Also, I have ordered a delivery of wine from Aldi.

Thurs 30th Apr 2020

The Food Box arrived yesterday. It was larger and heavier than I expected, in a sealed cardboard box. I was quite excited when I opened it, and pleased with its contents. Some of the items – cheese, milk, butter, meat – were wrapped up with ice packs in some kind of thick polythene. The only thing missing was something sweet. I treated myself to bacon sandwiches, on white bread, a welcome change from the worthy and healthy diet I have been following.

Fri 1st May 2020

I seem to have become lazier as these weeks of lockdown have extended. This morning I decided that I need to follow a definite routine of exercise to combat the claudication in my legs. I have printed off some guidance, and some record sheets to log my progress. I should try to do this regularly for twelve weeks. A thirty-minute session today was manageable, although I had to stop several times to let the pain slowly subside.

Weds 6th May 2020

On Monday night I slept badly, with the question of the strip of woodland nagging at me, and that worry triggering other negative emotions, my impatience with myself for getting so worked up over so little.

But spring has moved on apace, the trees are in leaf, the May is just beginning to blossom. The next couple of weeks, when the May is in full flower, are my favourite in the year.

P appeared on the path through the woods. He has just finished his latest book (he is a historian.) It is less academic than his previous books – part history, part memoir. We stand and talk for half an hour. He promises to send me the two essays of memoir that have previously been published. I come into the flat feeling valued, and feeling interested. The business of the woodland now seems trivial.

I spend an hour digging up the roots of brambles.
Slow, laborious task.

Sun 10th May 2020

Yesterday was the hottest day of the year so far. I sat outside, reading, in the sun. It was so warm that for half an hour I took off my t-shirt. My chest is very white, not very hairy. Whenever I heard someone coming along the path I hurriedly put my t-shirt back on.

But today is cold and windy. I fret because of the tree (on my land) leaning precariously over the garden of the people who live below me. I arranged to have it taken down but it was discovered that the tree has grown around the telephone wire. The tree surgeon retreated, surlily. We summoned the telephone engineers but they would do nothing unless the lines were not functioning and they had had complaints to that effect. So it seems that we have to wait for the tree to fall, bringing down the telephone line, and damaging whatever – and whoever – happens to be beneath it, before anything can be done.

Sometimes if I wake up in the night and hear the wind, I get out of bed and go to the window to check if the tree is still standing.

The neighbours below me have two dogs. They used to let the dogs shit all over the garden, including on the path. I would see the postman stepping very carefully along the path.

Tues 26th May 2020

I am writing this sitting outside at a table in the newly-cleared space at the back.

In line with the initial first easings of lockdown I have begun to arrange to meet people again. Last Wednesday I sat with S in her huge and beautifully-maintained garden. On Thursday Jaz drove out here and we spent most of the day together – a walk, an hour's lounging in a field having a picnic lunch, and the rest of the afternoon sitting out the back here. It was the longest time I have spent in someone's company for at least two months. On Friday I met P to talk about his latest book. On Saturday A and M came to bring me a present for Eid. And yesterday Jaz came over again and we worked together out here.

The news this weekend has been dominated by the exposure of Cummings' flouting of the lockdown regulations. As Johnson's chief adviser – and of course the force behind the divisive and dishonest Brexit campaign – he is now under pressure to resign. He was given the rather extraordinary and surely unprecedented opportunity to make a televised speech answer the questions of the press, sitting in the garden of Number 10. I cannot believe that a political adviser has been given this prominence ever before.

He refused to apologise, refused to resign. There is a great deal of anger amongst those who have made sacrifices during lockdown. And concern that many people will see this as an excuse (or reason) not to follow government advice from now on.

Weds 27th May 2020

When M and A came I took them on a tour of Claire's garden because M is a keen gardener. Claire came out and talked to them about plants. I remembered that they had been puzzled by the word "rhubarb" in one of our English sessions, so I directed them to the clump of rhubarb, huge leaved. Claire gave them a few sticks with directions on how to cook them.

They had brought me a large tray of Syrian sweets and a small potted plant in bright red flower. I ate far too many sweets on Saturday evening and woke up with gout in my left foot on Sunday. I had not realised that sweets can trigger gout. It was a short-lived attack, however, because I had medication at hand.

Thurs 28th May 2020

I saw a young thrush banging a snail's shell onto a stone – thrashing it down, quite violently. It was the sound that first alerted me – I was in the kitchen, with the door open – and I stood in the doorway and watched it, two yards away, busily oblivious to me. And, on a recent evening, I heard a cuckoo, the first I have heard for some years.

While Jaz and I were working outside on Monday, a very plump and very tame robin was in attendance.

Zoom meeting of City of Sanctuary. I feel guilty, because apart from my Skype English sessions with A and M I have done very little to contribute in the last two months. In truth there is little to be done, apart from phoning people to see if they are ok.

Fri 29th May 2020

The lockdown is gradually being eased. At present two people from different households can meet in public outdoor spaces; this will increase to six, and people will be able to hold these meetings in their gardens – but not in their houses. It seems clear that people have been ignoring these instructions for some time. While the emphasis in government press conferences is often on social interactions the real difficulties seem to be places of work and on public transport. I suspect that many people are now working in unsafe conditions – and the government is doing nothing about this.

The government have also rolled out one of their new initiatives, to the customary fanfare of overblown claims. This is the new track and trace system, which, according to Hancock, the Health Secretary, will be “world beating.” (There was similar publicity for a tracing App, which was trialled on the Isle of Wight, and supposed to be in place at the beginning of June. Little is being said about this now.) Unfortunately, but predictably, the government’s claims that they have quickly trained 2,500 contact tracers actually means that they have outsourced this, mainly to SERCO. They have not used the expertise of Health Authorities. The contact tracers will sit at home, unsupervised, following a script; they have been recruited from people with experience in customer service (not Health), they will be paid the minimum wage. It is difficult to put any faith in this system – difficult indeed to support any project in which SERCO is involved.

Again, it is a mixture of inefficiency and ideology, of bluster and contempt.

Sun 31st May 2020

Sometimes, mid-afternoon, I am suddenly taken back to those never-ending aimless afternoons of teenage years.

Sun 7th June 2020

It has, in truth, not been the best week for me.

It takes so little to knock me off my stride, to throw me off balance. Deliveries don't arrive, and I receive the irritating e-mail: "Sorry we missed you. We have left a calling card." But they haven't been anywhere near. The following day I manage to connect with someone on Yodel's web chat and they assure me that the delivery will be made within the next 24 hours. But it never comes. It may be that online shopping is becoming a larger part of people's lives, but here it is impossible to be sure that what I have ordered will actually be delivered.

The fact that such a small irritation becomes so magnified that it affects my equanimity is then further fuel for my mounting dissatisfaction with myself.

X phoned, a couple of days after I had texted her with the familiar message, "Why do you never call?" Sometimes after we have spoken I feel as if I have lost something, but I can't quite put my finger on what. She always, always, unsettles me.

Sun 14th June 2020

In London yesterday, more violence during demonstrations. This time it is from white men who have supposedly gathered to defend statues e.g. of Winston Churchill. The Sunday Telegraph's headline is "Ten Years in Jail for Protesters who Desecrate War Memorials", with little coverage of the violence of those "protecting" those memorials.

There is a photograph (not in the Telegraph) of one of these men pissing on a memorial plaque to a police-officer who was killed during a terrorist attack in 2017. He is shown from the back: white, middle-aged, overweight, thick-necked. I assume this was not a deliberate desecration, but simply stupidity. Other pictures of demonstrators with swastika tattoos giving Nazi salutes while they "defend" memorials to the war against the Nazis.

Fri 19th June 2020

May was hot and sunny. June has been wet, overcast, cool. I don't think I have ever felt so dependent on the weather for my sense of well-being.

Tues 26th Jan 2021

This morning I wake up – at six, after intermittent sleep – feeling irrepressibly bright and cheerful.

8.30pm. Personal cheerfulness, but a sombre day. The death toll in the UK from coronavirus has now exceeded 100,000. Boris Johnson looked suitably but unusually contrite in his briefing. I suspect that he and his government will never be held fully to account for their handling of this crisis.

I still have this nagging feeling that there is something fundamentally wrong in the way that politicians and the media present this crisis. There are over two million deaths worldwide from COVID – and thus this is supposed to be the greatest crisis the world has faced since the second world war. But six million people die every year from malnutrition, two million of them children. These don't count, in the same way. Farmers in Africa, kids in the Middle East, who cares? Their deaths do not threaten the wealth of the privileged.

Would it make a difference if the news carried a daily death toll of third world malnutrition?

Probably not. As we see with the vaccination against COVID, the richer countries have grabbed all the available supplies. Poorer countries can go hang.

Fri 29th Jan 2021

Vaccine yesterday morning, at Glossop Cricket Club. A large tent has been erected at the back of the pavilion, with areas roped off, and well-spaced chairs, and even some heaters, for the initial queue. Volunteers take your details and usher you forward, before more specifically medical questions from a doctor, and then onto the injection. The whole business took less than fifteen minutes. It was drizzling, steadily, as it often is in Glossop, so the tent was necessary.

I rewarded myself by making a (now) rare visit to the butcher's and buying a shoulder of lamb.

Mon 1st Feb 2021

The beginning of a new month. We take notice of the calendar moving on, because each day, each week, marks a further accumulation of vaccinations given. It is like compound interest, we hope to see the accumulated benefits later.

Tues 2nd Feb 2021

An hour's session with M yesterday, practising the continuous tenses. I slowly and steadily go through example after example, question after question. And each time I can see the flicker of uncertainty on his face, I can almost see his brain working. There is always a pause before he answers, sometimes a pained pause. It is like interviews you see on tv with distant news reporters where there is an interval of a few seconds before they hear the question that is put to them.

Tues 9th Feb 2021

Another cold morning, another sprinkling of snow overnight. The App on my phone tells me it is -4o. The cars and shed roofs are white, but on the walls and garden there is only a dusting. Cown Edge looks more wintery. A bright sky, but with a steady progression of clouds breaking up the sunlight – moving from left to right, as I look, from East to West.

Very light snow, in the sunshine, specks of light swirling in the air. Of all my friends in the village, MS, in her late seventies, is one of those who have taken the pandemic most easily in their stride. She Zooms or Skypes in conversation or lessons in French, Italian, Spanish and Greek – plus her many Labour Party meetings.

Mon 15th Feb 2021

Friday night was the coldest night we have had, about -60 here, and on Saturday morning the taps were dry. I checked with next door and they had no water either. We assumed that there was a frozen blockage and the water would return when it thawed. The temperature stayed below zero all day Saturday, and it only began to thaw slightly on Sunday evening. The United Utilities men had been working in the afternoon and evening and evidently they thought they had fixed the problem. But we still have no water today. Late afternoon two men came out, and seemed baffled. They spent some time moving around the woods in the dark with a metal detector and a prod. Several times in the last few days they have mentioned putting in a bowser but none has appeared.

Weds 17th Feb 2021

On Monday night I was woken by a thin flashing blue light on the ceiling, coming through a gap in the curtains. I could hear voices outside. There were several vehicles, lights, activity. Later I heard the sudden rush of water into the pipes, spluttering, banging, then another surge. I was concerned at the vehemence of it and I got up and checked; there were no leaks, no overflowings. It was not yet five o'clock, but I ran a hot bath – primarily because I felt so grubby, but also wary that the supply might abruptly go off again. I felt refreshed, cleansed, that Sunday evening feeling. It made me think back – we only had a bath (and changed our clothes) once a week when we were children, and I think I may have carried this on into my late teens, my early adulthood.

It is a temporary fix, a blue hosepipe snaking through the woods.

Despite the fact that the government and most of the press keep trying to sing the good news, such as the 15 million vaccines given to schedule, the shocking reality is that seven weeks into the post-Christmas lockdown daily death rates are still excessive – over 900 yesterday, 737 today. These kinds of figures seemed extraordinary throughout last year; now we are supposed to welcome them.

Sun 21st Feb 2021

Spring must be on its way, because in the last couple of days a tit has been attacking its reflection in the window, establishing its territorial rights. An intermittent tip-tapping on the glass; sometimes it retreats to the gutter above and then renews its attack. I'm not sure if it's a great tit or a blue tit, or if it's the same one as last year.

We have not only had the national lockdowns, but here in Greater Manchester months of local restrictions (Tier 3) so that there has been nothing like "normal" life for eleven months. And, faced with the prospect of a relaxation of lockdown (the PM will make a statement tomorrow) my feelings are ambivalent. Of course I would welcome a resumption of some of my outside activities, but, despite my repeated complaints that I am missing the pub, missing my friends, and so on, a part of me feels secure and comfortable within my one-man bubble, and there is a slight reluctance, anxiety, about stepping outside of it. At the moment I am fine, I am safe; no-one is bothering me, or if they are, I can simply not answer the phone, or texts, or I can turn off Skype or exit Zoom.

Reading Canetti, who came to England in the late thirties as a refugee from Germany. He had a long affair with the novelist Iris Murdoch. But much later, in his memoirs, he writes: "Everything I despise about English life is in her."

Fri 26th Feb 2021

The last few sessions B has been cheerful, and seems more relaxed. Today she was wearing a blue top and hijab, bright blue, much lighter and brighter than anything I had seen her wear before. And she herself looked lighter and brighter.

Thurs 4th Mar 2021

I have been long amused by my Iranian friend X's coinage of adjectives by indiscriminately adding a "y" to verbs or nouns – "huggy", "complainy", "talky", "questiony", "arrangey". The last five she has applied to me: questiony, because I always ask questions; detailly, because I am always asking for details; arrangey, because I am always trying to make definite arrangements. There are probably a few others, scattered through my notebooks, that don't come immediately to mind. But glancing through Hopkins a few days ago, chancing on the once-familiar first line of "Duns Scotus's Oxford"

"Towery city and branchy between towers"

those adjectives leaped out at me. And they are there elsewhere in Hopkins – "yellowy" in "The Candle Indoors", "barrowy" in "Harry Ploughman." I am sure there are many other examples.

So when I pursued this, I found "huggy" in Wiktionary (but not in the Shorter O.E.D.), "talky – (of a person) inclined to talk at length, talkative" in O.E.D. and other dictionaries – and I began to consider X's other adjectives. "Complainy", for example, is in Wiktionary as a recent neologism (but not in O.E.D.)

1978

I wake up with a jolt in the darkness, in tears from a dream that is already lost. The tears were dreamed and yet my waking face is wet. I bury my face in the pillow, hearing my muffled voice crying "I want my dad!" I am not sure if I have brought these cries across from my dream or if they began with my waking.

We are in the car with father, the two older girls and myself, in Scotland, on a sunlit early summer evening. We are on our way towards one of the nearby sandy beaches. It is not often that father, on his own, takes us out; some kind of treat perhaps, or maybe it is just that it is hot, and father is home early from the camp, and in a good mood, and the evenings are long and light. We turn off onto a narrow side road that runs downhill the last couple of miles to the sea. Father switches off the engine and pulls me over onto the driver's seat, onto his knees, to steer. I sit up straight, gripping the wheel tightly; I can feel the snake clasp on my belt digging into my stomach. The road falls and dips beneath us like a roller-coaster, the car feels suddenly weightless like a glider with the air falling from beneath it. I am nervous, but I am thrilled to be guiding this easy freewheeling glide, feeling the car respond to the slightest turn of the steering wheel, which is huge in my hands. On each side of me, like the sturdy arms of a chair, father's arms. Without the noise of the engine there is just the dry swishing of the tyres on the road, we move into and out of birdsong, and then, as the road levels out towards the foot of the hill and we begin to slow, he steadies the wheel with one hand, switches the engine on, a brief spluttering, and then we accelerate forwards again.

We never went away on holiday. It was inconceivable, for a start, that mother and father could spend a week in each other's company. The nearest we ever got to a holiday was going to visit our grandparents in Swindon. We went in shifts, Lesley and Jane for a week, then myself for a week. Father would drive us. I still remember some of the road numbers, A34, A449, A419 through Cirencester and Cricklade and then into Swindon on the Cricklade Road, where our grandparents lived. The journey would take four or five hours. I would sit there in the front seat next to him. We never quite knew what to say to each other. We would make little optimistic sallies, find something to talk about for a few minutes, but then we would trail off, and retreat. If he saw a soldier in uniform thumbing a lift he would always stop. It was a relief to him, he would suddenly become chatty, falling back into that world he missed, back into the lingo, offering over his left shoulder an opened packet of Woodbines without taking his eyes off the road.

I wish we had been able to be more at ease with each other. When Judy came to spend Christmas with us for the first time, when I was nineteen, it was an exceptional event in the family; none of us had previously had a friend to stay. By then Lesley and Jane were in their own homes, close by in the back streets; hardly out of their teens, and always with two or three children in tow.

The shop stayed open late on Christmas Eve, could not be closed until the last customer belonging to the Christmas Club had collected the goods they had been saving for, doggedly making weekly payments over the previous few months for Christmas presents for their children. The neat parcels, in neutral brown wrapping paper, were stacked away on high shelves in the shop, reached by stepladder. Christmas Eve was busy. Mother was scathing about men who came swaying and blustering into the shop after hours in the pub to squander even more money on enormous boxes of chocolates for their wives.

We congregated in the kitchen, baking, which was a Christmas Eve tradition – sausage rolls, mince pies, laid out in neat rows on wire cooling-racks.

Judy and I were planning to go out for an hour. There was a large cavernous pub a hundred yards away, The Royal, on the corner of the main road and Cemetery Road, and therefore referred to as The Widows' Rest, or, more usually, just The Widows.

"You might ask your father if he wants to go for a drink as well," mother said. It seemed a rare act of kindness towards him. I would never have dreamed of suggesting it myself.

I waited in the shop until he was free for a moment.

"Judy and I are going over the road for an hour. Would you like to come?" In my heart, I was hoping he would say no.

"Chance would be a fine thing!" he sniffed.

"No, no," I had to convince him. "Mother offered. She'll watch the shop." He was so obviously delighted, I felt ashamed.

We shouldered our way into the pub, which was heaving with muddled noise and boozy festive conviviality. There was hardly space to stand, every seat was taken, and the benches tightly packed, but a row of ancient women beckoned us over and squeezed closely together to make room; they were his regulars, who came into the shop every day for their five Park Drive or their snuff. Father took out a packet of Senior Service and passed them round. Senior Service were expensive, they took the place of his Woodbines on special occasions. Everyone was on their best behaviour; father was pleased to be seen with the both of us. He made the effort, towards Judy; he was polite, interested, perhaps slightly too deferential, I thought. At one point he embarrassed me by referring to blue blood, as if he assumed that Judy's posh accent made her aristocracy.

In thrall to Lawrence, I thought of Walter Morel, who could turn on the old politeness and charm when his sons brought girlfriends to the house – the flood of hospitality, so courteous, so gallant.

Why didn't I make this effort more often? There were other opportunities, neglected. Now I know that each of those petty snubs, negligible in themselves, add up to a weight of denial that must have wearied him. Most of the time, I gave no thought to his feelings, only to my own uneasiness. I was grudging, stinted. And now it is too late.

Last year I looked after him for a week so that mother could have some respite. All her life she had dreamed of Paris, a wistfully romantic, haphazardly imagined Paris, merging together Les Enfants du Paradis, A Tale of Two Cities, and Renoir's paintings; Paris a mirage, a fantasy. She had a print of a painting of boulevards in winter, horse drawn cabs, elegant ladies in black outlined against the snow.

And somehow it was arranged that she and Auntie Gwen would make the trip together. I couldn't imagine how the two of them, unsophisticated, dowdy, more than a little worse for wear, with hardly a word of French between them, would negotiate Paris, how they would survive, but they came back unscathed, and in irrepressible high spirits.

It was odd to think of mother venturing outside the context of home and family, odd to think that she could have any life at all separate to us. And I was left alone with father, stranded, abandoned, while the others dwindled into the distance. When you are at home a part of you is snatched back into childhood, into the patterns, the structures of feeling, that you fondly imagine you have long since outgrown. I was nervous, fearful. I had never had to be alone with him for so long. But my memory is, must be, at fault here, even though it was only a year or so ago, for Jill was there, surely? Jill was sixteen, she was at school, she must have been there with me and father. But I have no memory of her, only of myself alone with father. While mother was away the shop bell was silent. For the first time in twenty years, the first time since we had moved in, the shop was closed for a week's holiday.

On the second day father stomped his way deliberately along the passage to the kitchen. After a few minutes he summoned me, with a slurred call and an impatient banging of his stick. When I came in he was stood up from the Elsan, his pyjama trousers crumpled around his ankles. He made some vaguely encouraging noises, then suddenly bent over, gripping his stick tightly, his backside in the air towards me. His legs were wasted, stringy, mottled with unexplained patches of dark blue-black. Thin thighs, fleshless buttocks. He grunted again, insistently.

I realised he wanted me to wipe his arse.

I stood there paralysed in a silent seething panic. I couldn't. I just couldn't do it.

Everything stood still, for what seemed like a long time, and then cranked into gear again.

“You can wipe your own bum,” I said briskly, businesslike, as if it wasn’t an issue. But he knew, he knew. I tore off some sheets of toilet paper and handed them to him, and then left the room. I thought I heard him chuckling to himself behind me, nasty, self-satisfied.

A few minutes later I heard him clumping back along the passage. I held the door open for him. He squeezed past me with his lopsided lurch, leaning heavily on his stick. His polished black swagger stick. I remembered him marching at the head of a company of soldiers with that same stick tucked in under his arm.

I felt unequal to these demands. I was ashamed of my weakness; I was failing in this absolute duty, of being a son. Let this cup pass from me.

At Christmas I looked after the house so that mother and father and Jill could spend the holiday at Sally’s, in Worcester. We didn’t want to expose father to a possible recurrence of the discord and violence of the previous Christmas. Steve, Sally’s soldier husband, drove up to collect them. For the first time, the shop was to be silent at mid-day on Christmas Eve.

Mother had feared to leave the house and shop unattended. The area of demolition, the spreading matrix of cobbled streets enclosing only empty space and rubble, was creeping nearer. Ahead of it there were rows of empty houses that had been cleared of their people. Organised gangs of thieves systematically stripped these houses of lead pipes, lead flashing from the roofs, and anything else worth taking, before the council contractors arrived to effect their legitimate salvage. It wasn’t always clear which houses were still occupied and which not. There were half-empty streets where the remaining occupants came home from work to find their homes ransacked, their bedrooms flooded next time it rained.

When you opened the gate from the yard at the back of our house, there was an expanse of empty space, where there had been the backs of the next terrace. You were exposed, unprotected. You could now see the railway lines, which had been three streets away. Over there, by the railway, huge fires smouldered for days on end, the rafters and timbers from demolished houses. And on one plot of cleared land there was a winter encampment of gypsies, whose children and dogs seemed to roam the back alleys at all hours of the day and night. It seemed to me like a war zone, gutted buildings, rubble, encampments of refugees, gangs of looters, the smell of burning in the air.

It was eerie to be on my own at home. The house had never been empty; the shop was always open, there was always someone in attendance. I hadn’t expected to be so nervous; before I went to bed I checked every room, and then went round the house and checked every room again. I had never gone to sleep or woken

up alone in that house before. Christmas morning, of all mornings. And it only happened once, because on the following few nights I borrowed one or other of my sisters' children to keep me company.

And so father's last Christmas was reasonably peaceful, at least.

I am trying to make excuses for myself. I am clutching at straws.

When we were in Germany father, and most of the other men, would sometimes be away; "on manoeuvres" was the phrase that everyone used. Sometimes this would happen without warning; you woke up one morning to be told that he had disappeared in the night. I pictured the tanks under straggling camouflage nets in the woods, the men sleeping on the ground under dripping canvases, tucked in next to the caterpillar tracks – and, over the border, in the forests of the Soviet sector, the Russian tanks and their vaguely sinister crews, asleep in their fur caps.

One evening something disturbed me from my sleep and I crept into the living room to ask for a glass of water, the usual excuse for getting out of bed, and instead of being briskly despatched again I was allowed to curl up on the sofa under a blanket. Mother was ironing. Father was in khaki battledress. He was packing his kitbag; apparently he was going on manoeuvres that night, although we hadn't been told of this before we went to bed. Hence, perhaps, their leniency towards me. The two of them were quiet, said little, their voices low and serious. I lay there half-asleep below them, thinking that the longer I kept quiet the longer I would be allowed to stay there. Looking back, I have no idea whether mother was just doing the usual family ironing or whether she was ironing stuff for father to pack; it seems odd to iron clothes that were going to be worn night and day in a tank, but we children were used to the peculiar obsessiveness of army life, the blanco, the spit and polish. Everything that father packed was neatly folded, or tightly rolled. Towards the end, packets of Woodbines, and bags of boiled sweets. He always used to take sweets, all of the tank crews did; inside the tanks they couldn't smoke.

He must have noticed me eyeing the sweets with interest – these sweets were special, they were for grown-ups, they were for soldiers – because he tore open one of the packets and gave me a handful. I sat up a little, wedged into the corner of the sofa, pulled the itchy cream-coloured army blanket around me, and worked my way through the sweets. They laughed, they could hear me crunching them. "You're supposed to suck them, not chobble them," he said. "They last me for hours."

They were the sweetest sweets I ever tasted.

I search for happy memories of him, and there seem to be so few. I wake up now saying "I want my dad" but I don't remember ever crying out "I want my dad"

when I was a child, when he was still alive. But now I feel like a toddler staggering on his feet, with his arms reaching out, stumbling towards his father, waiting to be grasped, to be safely held and swung up high.

And then the guilt slams into me. I have no right to these feelings of grief. I have no right to mourn him, because I didn't love him enough. When I act as a grieving son in front of other people it must be a sham.

I was telephoned at work. Jane put the call through to me although I was busy, I had told her I was not to be disturbed. After I had put the phone down she came into the office looking concerned; she had understood the urgency in my sister's voice, shouting above the noise of the traffic outside the phone box.

I caught the next train at Euston.

The shop was in darkness when I arrived; I had to go round the back to get into the house. Mother was in the kitchen, at the sink, washing dirty milk bottles for some reason; a cigarette clamped in the corner of her mouth, one eye squinting against the smoke. She looked angry, defensive, as if she almost expected to be held at fault. Jane – my sister Jane – was at the table going through some papers. She looked relieved to see me. She had just come back from the hospital. Father was in a deep coma; the Sister on the ward had promised to get in touch if it was necessary during the night.

He had had another stroke, a severe one, some time during the previous night. Mother had found him unconscious when she got up in the morning.

The question briefly flickered at the back of my mind – had she heard him call out, ring that accursed bell, bang his stick? – heard, and ignored?

Later I was woken up by a persistent hammering on the shop door. I went into the shop, putting on all the lights, blinking at the sudden fluorescent glare. A policeman was standing patiently waiting on the doorstep. I didn't have all the keys, all the paraphernalia needed to open the shop door. I spoke to him through the metal grill in the window in the door.

"Mr Rendell? I have a message for you. You are to phone the hospital."

"Oh? He's gone, has he?" I said. The words spilled out without me thinking. They sounded callous, off-hand, glib.

"The only message I have is that you should phone the hospital," he repeated, stolidly.